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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000071

SIPDIS

FOR PA/PRS, NEA/PPD, AND NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT'S AL-ARABIYA INTERVIEW: FACTUAL PRESS
COVERAGE; PUBLIC APPRECIATES OVERTURE

REF: A. STATE 7500

[B](#). TUNIS 51

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: President Obama's January 26 interview on al-Arabiya has garnered limited specific reaction, probably a result of al-Arabiya's lean market penetration in Tunisia. That said, those contacts who did watch the interview or read the transcript have responded favorably, especially to the metaphor of an "extended hand." Embassy contacts continue to echo the overwhelmingly positive response to the Obama Administration that they articulated at the January 20 reception/inauguration viewing that the Ambassador hosted (Ref B), although some have added that they will judge President Obama by his actions, not his words. Across the board, contacts have been telling us that if President Obama wants to change the way America is perceived in the world, he needs to "get serious" about solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. End Summary.

GOT Welcomes Obama; Wants to Re-Engage

[1](#)2. (SBU) Oussama Romdhani, the Director of the Tunisian Agency for External Communications, told the Ambassador that he was pleased to see President Obama's outreach via al-Arabiya. He also commented that President Obama had moved faster than anyone expected on outreach to the Arab and Muslim worlds and on specific challenges, such as announcing the closure of the detention center at Guantanamo Bay. Echoing a theme heard from a range of Embassy contacts, Romdhani said that it is essential for the Obama Administration to make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

[1](#)3. (SBU) In a February 2 meeting at the Chamber of Deputies, 15 Tunisian Parliamentarians conveyed that they welcomed the Obama Administration, that they were hopeful about the positive impact that his policies would bring to the Middle East, and that they were eager to revive bilateral relations. Three participants had visited the United States in late January, during which they attended the inauguration and held several meetings with Administration officials, Senators, and Members of Congress. They were joined by others, who are Members of the US Caucus. Several Members embraced the President's "new discourse," as articulated in both his inaugural address and his interview with al-Arabiya. Some underscored importance of the President's themes of mutual respect and extending a hand to the Muslim world.

¶4. (SBU) In the two days following President Obama's al-Arabiya interview, Tunisian media offered factual coverage. A few editorials have since been published, with most focusing on Senator Mitchell's appointment and travel in the region. One opposition newspaper's editorial, headlined, "Historic Opportunity," gave voice to the hope that the Obama Administration will work to bring peace to the region, reconcile East and West, and destroy the roots of extremism, which grow stronger when justice does not prevail." An editorial in French daily Le Temps characterized Mitchell as "an honest and balanced man." A few days later, Le Temps noted that it would be naive to expect revolutionary changes from President Obama, since the United States still considers Israel as a strategic ally. Even so, the editorial welcomed the appointment of Senator Mitchell as a "clear signal" that the Administration is seeking an equitable resolution to the conflict.

Tunisians Welcome Overture
But Will Judge Actions, Not Words

¶5. (C) Ambassador and EmbOffs continue to engage Tunisians in many walks of life to solicit views on the new Administration and ideas about how to take advantage of this new beginning to move forward in our bilateral relationship. Embassy will report our findings and recommendations septel. In the meantime, key themes that we have been hearing from our

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contacts include the following:

-- There continues to be an overwhelmingly positive response to President Obama's election, his vision, and the policy approaches that he has already put in place with respect to the closing of Guantanamo and appointment of Senator Mitchell as Special Envoy.

-- Many perceive President Obama as the embodiment of "the American dream." They believe that as such he has restored the United States as a moral leader in the international community.

-- Some contacts identify with the President's African roots and feel proud of his African ties.

-- Many contacts have expressed appreciation for his overtures to the Arab/Muslim world.

-- As more than one contact has put it, "Ultimately, we will judge Obama by his actions, not words." Expanding on this point, one opposition party figure told us that, while many appreciate President Obama's articulation of policy, there is still widespread skepticism that he will be able to implement all that he has set out to do. Thus, this contact said he would refrain from making judgments until after Obama's first 100 days in office.

-- Across the board, contacts have been telling us that if President Obama really wants to make a difference in how America is perceived by the world, he needs to "get serious" about solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They have specified that this will entail "reining in" the Government of Israel on excessive use of force against Palestinians and the expansion of settlements. One contact, a retired diplomat, suggested that Obama use the phrase "42 years of occupation is enough" in a public speech. Several contacts have told us that they support Israel's right to exist and to defend itself, but they reject Israel's military actions as disproportionate and contrary to international humanitarian law. Thus, they urge the United States to make clear to Israel that it will defend Israel's right to defend itself,

but not Israel's "crimes." These contacts also want to see a swift and comprehensive humanitarian response to the destruction in Gaza.

-- Some contacts opined that Obama should have chosen al-Jazeera for his interview, reasoning that al-Jazeera enjoys the greatest Arab viewership.

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<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>
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